

# Four years after fleeing Hurricane Katrina, principal back on top at Irving school

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Byline: Katherine Leal Unmuth

Sep. 27--Tanya Jones had just completed the first year in her dream job as a school principal. Then Hurricane Katrina knocked her down.

The hurricane destroyed her family's home. She relocated to Dallas with no possessions except a few items of clothing. Just four years later, the New Orleans native has risen through the ranks to become a principal again -- in the Irving school district. The new principal of Thomas Haley Elementary School sits in her office, neatly dressed in a black suit paired with a scarf, recalling the aftermath of the hurricane. "When I look back, I don't know how I did it," she said.

"She fell off the ladder and was able to rebuild herself," said her husband, Jemel. "She did it through hard work." The items in her office offer glimpses from her previous life. A bookcase holds a teacher of the year plaque Jones won as a high school English teacher in the New Orleans public schools. She's a long way from Katrina. Her home was underwater. Her father was missing. The day before the storm, the family evacuated to Birmingham, Ala. Then her husband's employer, Hilton, transferred him to Dallas, and they moved into a hotel with their two young children. "There was nothing we took with us and nothing to go back to," she recalled. The career Jones had worked so hard to achieve was gone. She'd worked her way up from student teacher to principal of McMain Magnet Secondary School in New Orleans. She recalls going to a dollar store and sweeping items off the shelf to buy, even turning to food stamps at one point. She watched a former student on the news stranded at the Louisiana Superdome. Her father was later found taking refuge in a cemetery. But once in Texas, Jones quickly obtained a job in October 2005, teaching at MacArthur High School. At MacArthur, other teachers noticed that her family didn't have winter coats and offered to help. Back to New Orleans But even as Jones was getting help in her new home, she was thinking about her former students. Former McMain teacher Ruby Simmons recalls that during a visit to New Orleans shortly after Katrina, Jones organized parents and sought out a school board member to try to get the school reopened. "She didn't even have a house," Simmons said. "But she was concerned about, 'Can we get our school open?' " While there, Jones could only salvage her college diplomas from Xavier University of Louisiana and her wedding photo from her former home. "It was like if you detonate a bomb and the pieces just scatter," she said. Eventually, the family bought a house in The Colony, and she was promoted to vice principal at Nimitz High School. Fellow vice principal Carla Garrett said she didn't realize Katrina had taken a toll on Jones until she overheard her telling a student from Louisiana. "She has a sense of something special that we don't all have," she said. "She's a person who displays a calm and assurance and confidence that doesn't make sense when you're struggling through so many issues." Garrett said Jones is a role model for those dealing with the aftermath of a disaster. New home in Texas

The New Orleans school system was well-known as one of the worst-performing in the nation. But McMain, where Jones was principal, was a magnet school for grades seven to 12 that drew students from throughout the city. The school received four out of five stars under Louisiana's state rating system in 2005. In Orleans Parish at the time, most campuses were rated unacceptable. Still, she struggled with scant resources for her students. In Irving, she was impressed by how much more technology and teacher training was available. "I thought, 'If we had this in New Orleans, we would be unstoppable,'" she said. In Texas, she dealt with the challenge of many evacuees being viewed negatively.

"I think we were stigmatized, and it was going to be difficult because of where we came from," her husband said. "But when she became a teacher again, I actually knew she was going to be a principal again."

Jones said she was in denial for a while about leaving her old life behind. She'd never lived outside New Orleans. "Part of me sometimes wants to forget," she said. "I can't remember a lot of things."

But she said it would be hard for her to leave her new life and plans for the future. Haley is a "recognized" school, and Jones' goal is to move it to "exemplary." "I am eternally grateful to the Irving school district," she said. "I'll be here as long as they'll have me." Tanya Jones had just completed the first year in her dream job as a school principal. Then Hurricane Katrina knocked her down.

The hurricane destroyed her family's home. She relocated to Dallas with no possessions except a few items of clothing. Just four years later, the New Orleans native has risen through the ranks to become a principal again -- in the Irving school district. The new principal of Thomas Haley Elementary School sits in her office, neatly dressed in a black suit paired with a scarf, recalling the aftermath of the hurricane. "When I look back, I don't know how I did it," she said.

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By Katherine Leal Unmuth

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